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PART I

Making operas

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1 | Introduction: ‘A single act  
at the Opéra-Comique’

I cannot forget that they were damning Faust the day of my first excursion with Renaud. . . Ignorant little provincial that I was, I asked, ‘Is it a première?’ He responded without malice, ‘No, my little shepherdess, a two-hundred-and-seventy-seventh.’  
– Colette<sup>1</sup>

In the first decade of the twentieth century, success on the lyric stage was still regarded as the ultimate accolade for a young Parisian composer. Careers were kick-started, shaped and remembered by a composer’s operas – or, sometimes, a lack of them. *Pelléas et Mélisande* made Debussy’s name, the posthumous success of *Carmen* retrospectively redefined Bizet’s compositional status, and the unflagging popularity of *Faust*, *Manon* and their companions assured the standing of Gounod and Massenet – and the coffers of their publishers. Chabrier’s run of abysmal misfortune in the opera houses of Paris and Brussels left him long uncelebrated by the general public; and after the 1913 première of *Pénélope* almost all of the reviews noted the musical world’s (appropriately) long wait for this, the 67-year-old Fauré’s first opera, with many observing that there had been doubts as to whether he would ever be capable of the task.<sup>2</sup> Even Chopin, newly arrived in Paris in the early 1830s, had been exhorted by his erstwhile teacher Joseph Elsner to get on with *his* opera because ‘only an opera can show your talent in a true light and win for it eternal life’;<sup>3</sup> eighty years later Émile Vuillermoz, reviewing the première of *L’Heure espagnole*, was not being entirely facetious when he wrote ‘It is well understood, in our twentieth century, that a single act at the Opéra-Comique is of more musical importance than three symphonies, ten quartets, twenty sonatas and a hundred songs.’<sup>4</sup>

By the spring of 1907 Maurice Ravel had announced himself to the musical world with major contributions to the repositories of contemporary piano and chamber music and song. With four Prix de Rome cantatas

<sup>1</sup> ‘Claudine au concert’, *Gil Blas*, 12 January 1903, recalling a scene in *Claudine à Paris*.  
<sup>2</sup> See the many reviews cited in Phillips, *Gabriel Fauré: A Guide to Research*, 358–79.  
<sup>3</sup> Chopin, *Selected Correspondence*, 124.    <sup>4</sup> Vuillermoz, ‘Les Théâtres: *L’Heure espagnole*’, 67.

under his belt as well as the orchestral *Shéhérazade* songs, he had developed considerable expertise in writing for voices and orchestra, and with the *Histoires naturelles* he had pioneered a manner of vocal writing that was highly individual, technically daring and impeccably crafted. Although the *scandale* of the 1905 Prix de Rome (in which he had been disqualified in the preliminary round) had died down, the controversy surrounding the January 1907 première of *Histoires naturelles* was keeping Ravel's name in the press and the public eye. His friends and colleagues must have been encouraging him to try his hand at a work for the lyric stage, and he could not have been hard to convince. Ravel had for several years been acknowledged as one of the most gifted of the younger generation, but he had not yet won recognition as a composer of the first rank. A successful opera would be the most tangible evidence of his 'arrival'.

With his final spectacular failure in the Prix de Rome, Ravel had left his student days behind him. Buoyed by a contract with the prestigious publisher Durand, he was soon enjoying the most prolific compositional period of his life, riding a tide of works that carried him from the *Introduction et Allegro*, *Sonatine* and *Miroirs* (1905), *Histoires naturelles* (1906), *L'Heure espagnole* and *Rapsodie espagnole* (1907) to *Gaspard de la nuit* (1908) and the beginnings of *Daphnis et Chloé* (1909). Photos of Ravel around 1907 show him still sporting the jaunty moustache of his student days, plus the soft beard that he had grown around 1905 (by 1909 he would have shaved off both for good). Thirty-two years old that spring, the composer was living with his parents and brother Édouard near the Ravel family workshop in the Parisian suburb of Levallois. He was surrounded by a circle of close friends and staunch supporters, in the band of musicians, writers and artists who called themselves the 'Apaches'. Alongside the composers Florent Schmitt, Maurice Delage, Paul Ladmirault, Marcel Chaberg and Déodat de Séverac, the pianist Ricardo Viñes, the painter Paul Sordes, the writers Léon-Paul Fargue and Tristan Klingsor (Léon Leclère) and the salon host Cipa Godebski,<sup>5</sup> the Apaches also included the critics Vuillermoz and Michel-Dimitri Calvocoressi, both of whom gave enormous practical assistance to Ravel by championing his music in the press. Besides the Apaches, Romain Rolland, Louis Laloy, Jean Marnold and Georges Jean-Aubry were also more-than-useful allies.

The support of these enlightened critics was essential to Ravel in the first half of 1907, a period undoubtedly satisfying in some respects but highly

<sup>5</sup> Haine, 'Cipa Godebski et les Apaches', argues convincingly that Godebski was a member of 'la bande', but see also Pasler, 'A sociology of the Apaches'.

uncomfortable in others. The year opened with a clutch of premières: after the rowdy first performance of *Histoires naturelles* on 12 January came the less turbulent debuts of the orchestrated *Une barque sur l'océan* (3 February) and *Introduction et Allegro* (22 February), then on 6 June the songs *Sainte* and *Les grands vents venus d'outremer* were premiered by soprano Hélène Luquiens with Ravel at the piano.

Whatever pleasure these performances brought Ravel, however, would have been undermined by the vicious campaign waged against him that spring by the critic Pierre Lalo. Lalo had responded to the première of *Histoires naturelles* with a vituperative article in *Le Temps*, in which a scathing critique of Ravel's cycle served as the point of departure for broader reflections on the mediocre *debussysme* of the younger generation of composers 'with Maurice Ravel at their head'.<sup>6</sup> It was not Lalo's first attempt thus to discredit Ravel. A year earlier he had greeted the appearance of the *Miroirs* with similar cries of *debussysme*:

The most striking of [Ravel's] faults is a strange resemblance to M. Claude Debussy; a resemblance so pronounced and so astonishing that often, when listening to a piece of Ravel's, it seems as if one is hearing a fragment of *Pelléas et Mélisande* [...]. After Chopin, after Schumann, after Liszt, M. Debussy has created a new manner of writing for the piano, a special style, a distinctive virtuosity [...] all the young composers are immediately mirroring him, employing the same methods, writing in the same style.\*<sup>7</sup>

At the time Ravel had replied to Lalo privately by letter, pointing out that his own *Jeux d'eau* had been published at the beginning of 1902, when *Pour le piano* was Debussy's only major published piano work: 'I don't have to tell you of my deep admiration for these pieces, but from a purely pianistic point of view, they contained nothing new.'<sup>8</sup> In 1907, effectively accused once again of plagiarism, Ravel responded publicly in a forthright missive to *Le Temps*, which was published on 9 April:

Lalo attributes to 'certain musicians' some unusual remarks concerning an artist of genius, Claude Debussy. According to current practice, M. Lalo does not name the 'young musicians' that he accuses so lightly. However, my name being cited rather

<sup>6</sup> Lalo, 'La Musique', Feuilleton du *Temps*, 19 March 1907; see Cornejo and Diamantopoulou, 'Maurice Ravel et Pierre Lalo', 28.

<sup>7</sup> *Le Temps*, 30 January 1906. <sup>8</sup> *OL*, letter 29.

frequently in the course of the article could give rise to a regrettable confusion, and unsuspecting readers might think that it is about me [...] I do not care whether those who know my works only through reviews think me a shameless plagiarist. I will not, however, even by those sorts of people, be taken for an imbecile.\*<sup>9</sup>

Lalo's response, printed in the same column, was malevolent. 'M. Ravel defends himself without having been accused', he wrote. Without seeking the composer's permission to publish what had been a private communication, he reproduced Ravel's 1906 letter, an act that contributed substantially to the permanent rupture between Ravel and Debussy. A final fiery exchange of letters appeared in the columns of *Le Temps* a month later. Ravel furiously repudiated Lalo's 'ridiculous accusations'; Lalo in response bluntly accused Ravel of dishonesty and concluded: 'I have often spoken of him as an artist endowed with very great gifts. But I have also regretted that the most obvious of these gifts is that of imitation. I have no reason to alter that opinion.'<sup>10</sup>

This personal attack distressed and angered Ravel, for whom professional and personal integrity was paramount. In a letter to Jean-Aubry in March he wrote, 'I wanted to tell you how touched I was by your interest in my works. People are endeavouring, especially in recent times, to prove to me that I'm deceiving myself, or better, that I'm trying to deceive others. I cannot prevent myself from feeling a certain annoyance about this.'<sup>11</sup> Two months later Romain Rolland recorded in his journal, '[Ravel's] rift with Debussy seems to distress him.'<sup>12</sup>

The impact upon Ravel of Lalo's malicious campaign must have been intensified by his distress over the failing health of his father. The Ravel family was close-knit and Pierre-Joseph, a master engineer, inventor and musician *manqué*, had wholeheartedly supported his son's musical career. As Marcel Marnat writes, Pierre-Joseph also shared the general opinion that 'real success for a musician would be conferred in the theatre'.<sup>13</sup> This explains in part why Ravel worked so feverishly, that spring and summer, on his setting of Franc-Nohain's one-act play *L'Heure espagnole*. In a letter to his Basque relative Jane Courteault in mid-August he wrote, 'This is how I'm relaxing from the fatigue caused by a crazy amount of work: in less than three months, I've put together a comic opera in one act, *L'Heure*

<sup>9</sup> 'La Musique', Feuilleton du *Temps*, 19 April 1907; *OL*, letter 41.

<sup>10</sup> 'La Musique', Feuilleton du *Temps*, 7 May 1907. See Cornejo and Diamantopoulou, 'Maurice Ravel et Pierre Lalo', 32–5.

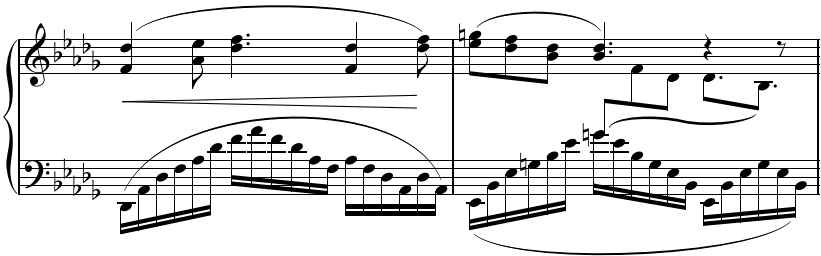
<sup>11</sup> *OL*, letter 40. <sup>12</sup> Strauss and Rolland, *Correspondance*, 158.

<sup>13</sup> Marnat, *Maurice Ravel*, 261.

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Ex. 1.1a Debussy, ‘Clair de lune’ (*Suite bergamasque*), bars 29–30



Ex. 1.1b Ravel, *Sur l’herbe*, bar 21



*espagnole*, on a libretto by Franc-Nohain. This work will probably be mounted at the Opéra-Comique this winter.’<sup>14</sup> But on 15 November he would write to Ida Godebska, ‘Things are not well at home. My father is weakening continually. His mental capacity is at its very lowest: he mixes up everything and no longer knows where he is at times. I no longer have any hope that he will see my work on stage: he is already too far gone to understand it.’<sup>15</sup> In the end, more than three years would pass before *L’Heure espagnole* went into rehearsal. Pierre-Joseph Ravel died in October 1908.

These personal and professional traumas did not prevent the year 1907 from being one of Ravel’s most productive. In March he completed his *Vocalise-Étude en forme de Habanera*, in April *Les grands vents venus d’outremer*, and in June *Sur l’herbe*. The last of these arguably contains a pointed riposte to Lalo: its final line (‘Hé! bonsoir la Lune’) unmistakably quotes Debussy’s ‘Clair de lune’ from the *Suite bergamasque*, published just two years earlier (Ex. 1.1). The rhythm, texture and modality – where every note in the bar contradicts the four-sharp key signature – are so different

<sup>14</sup> OL, letter 43. <sup>15</sup> Orenstein, *Ravel, Man and Musician*, 54n15.

from the surrounding bars that the citation stands out as if in quotation marks.

By October Ravel was able to sign off on both the piano duet score of *Rapsodie espagnole* and the vocal score of *L'Heure espagnole*, although the latter must have been well advanced by July, when he first showed it to Albert Carré, the director of the Opéra-Comique (see p. 17). It is impossible not to wonder whether his decision to undertake the opera, and the speed with which he drafted it – he had begun work only in April – were due not just to his father's failing health but also to his desire to respond to Pierre Lalo's intemperate attacks. An opera would prove his capacity to write a major work and demonstrate that he, Maurice Ravel, had a unique compositional voice. He would choose a text set not in the misty 'Allemonde' of *Pelléas et Mélisande* but in earthy Spain, no Symbolist drama but a rollicking farce.

### From *L'Heure* to *L'Enfant*, and a 'sunken' opera

*L'Heure espagnole* was written and first performed in an era that saw a number of significant French operatic premières, from *Louise* in 1900 and *Pelléas et Mélisande* in 1902 to *Ariane et Barbe bleue* in 1907 and *Pénélope* in 1913. In many respects, *L'Heure* is a reactive work, deliberately provocative in its subject matter and its text-setting. Via the French fascination with *espagnolade*, it makes game of both the frivolity of *opéra comique* and the self-conscious seriousness of grand opera. Although by no means the work of a composer who felt himself obliged to make obeisance to any operatic shrines, *L'Heure* nevertheless gestures more, and more directly, to its musical and cultural circumstances than does *L'Enfant et les sortilèges*.

In 1907 Ravel was still a young man. A decade later he was entering middle age, hastened into it by the War that had deprived him of energy, health, inspiration and the solitude that was so necessary to him. He had lost friends and relatives at the front, and in January 1917 his beloved mother died too. 'I think that this terrible period has crushed me, and I will not be able to pick myself up again', he wrote to Hélène Kahn-Casella in the autumn of 1919.<sup>16</sup> But he was trying: sometime in the spring of 1917 he had accepted a commission from Jacques Rouché, the director of the Opéra Garnier, to set to music a 'petit poème' by Colette. Perhaps Ravel was thus

<sup>16</sup> Roy (ed.), 'Lettres de Maurice Ravel à Hélène et Alfredo Casella', 77.

forcibly attempting to apply himself to composition, although the long gestation of the opera – which he would finish just weeks before its 1925 première – suggests that the task was more than he could manage immediately, at that low ebb in his life. The works Ravel did complete during the six-year period 1919–25 (*La Valse*, the Sonata for Violin and Cello, *Tzigane* and a few short pieces) total fewer minutes of music than he had composed during that single fruitful year of 1907. Even in August 1924, as he was at last throwing himself into the completion of *L'Enfant*, he would write to his house-editor Lucien Garban, 'I'm slogging away but with no success, the magneto is worn out.'<sup>17</sup>

In 1917 Ravel had been trying to recover his *métier* by resuscitating several projects that the war had forced him to put aside. In January 1917 he wrote to Sergei Diaghilev, formally giving his commitment to a new work for the Ballets russes.<sup>18</sup> Although the specified project (based on a scenario by the Italian Futurist poet Francesco Cangiullo) was never even partially sketched, what Ravel did eventually present to Diaghilev was *La Valse*. This was his realisation of a work he had been tinkering with intermittently since as early as 1906 but abandoned after the outbreak of war in 1914, in part because of its working title, 'Wien': it was, he admitted, inescapably unfortunate.<sup>19</sup> In June 1917 Ravel also returned to another project he had put aside three years earlier, *Le Tombeau de Couperin* (eventually completed in November 1917). Then there was a third work, which, like 'Wien', had been on Ravel's mind for more than a decade: *La Cloche engloutie*.

Based on Gerhardt Hauptmann's play *Die versunkene Glocke*, *La Cloche engloutie* had been translated and transformed into a libretto by Ferdinand Hérold, to whom Ravel was introduced by his old counterpoint and orchestration teacher André Gedalge. The story was, as Arbie Orenstein writes, 'a spiritual descendant of *Der Freischütz*, with a generous supply of forest scenes, elves, nymphs, prayers, incantations, and dances, as well as human and supernatural beings'.<sup>20</sup> When he began work on *La Cloche* in the summer of 1906, Ravel was excited and optimistic:

[12 June]

For two weeks I've had my nose to the grindstone [*je ne quitte pas le turbin*]. I've never worked with such intensity. [...] It's thrilling to write a work for the theatre! I won't say that it comes all by itself, but that's precisely what's best of all.

<sup>17</sup> Orenstein (ed.), 'La Correspondance de Maurice Ravel à Lucien Garban (1919–1934)', 56.

<sup>18</sup> *OL*, letter 143. <sup>19</sup> *OL*, letters 121–2. <sup>20</sup> Orenstein, *Ravel, Man and Musician*, 50.

[20 August]

Think of what there is already: in addition to what already existed of the first act, a large part of the 2nd as well. (You want an opera in 5 acts? You'll have it in 1 week!)<sup>21</sup>

Less than a year later, however, Ravel would set *La Cloche engloutie* aside. The knowledge that he had to work quickly for his father's sake was undoubtedly a factor in the decision to abandon the grand opera in favour of a one-act farce. But he must also have been prompted by potent aesthetic concerns. In *La Cloche* he was contemplating an opera whose scale, narrative and continuous musical discourse would inevitably prompt critics to think of *Pelléas*, and indeed of Wagner. With Pierre Lalo's censure ringing in his ears, to offer the musical world a five-act opera on a mythical subject by a writer associated with the Symbolist movement was simply asking for trouble.

By 1908, however, with the vocal score of *L'Heure* in press, the orchestration to complete and *Gaspard de la nuit* on his work table, Ravel was still eager to resume work on *La Cloche engloutie*: 'I'm going to get back to it', he wrote to Theodor Szántó on 4 June.<sup>22</sup> Two weeks later, he wrote to Ida Godebska, 'I re-examined what was written of *La Cloche engloutie*. Lord! how it has aged! It has to be redone! Dog of a profession, but it has its charms . . .'<sup>23</sup> He was to return to the opera periodically over the next few years, even signing a contract for it with Hérold and Hauptmann in 1909.<sup>24</sup> In an interview in 1912, he seems pre-emptively to have announced that it was 'on the point of being finished' – though either the composer or the journalist (who claimed in the same article that Ravel was also about to write an opera on *Don Quichotte*) was certainly exaggerating.<sup>25</sup> But by 1914 the opera seemed to have stalled for good: 'Working at *La Cloche engloutie* is delicate [because of its German origins] – I think it really is [sunk] this time', he wrote to Roland-Manuel in October.<sup>26</sup>

It is difficult to ascertain how much of *La Cloche engloutie* Ravel had actually sketched; Orenstein suggests parts of Acts 1 and 2 only.<sup>27</sup> He points out, however, that the opening material of *L'Enfant et les sortilèges* is strikingly similar to the start of Act 2 of *La Cloche*, while Roland-Manuel claimed that the 'Nocturne' that opens the second part of *L'Enfant* was likewise drawn from the sketches for the second act.<sup>28</sup> It seems probable,

<sup>21</sup> OL, letters 32 and 35.    <sup>22</sup> OL, letter 52.    <sup>23</sup> OL, letter 53.

<sup>24</sup> Orenstein, 'Some unpublished music and letters', 320.

<sup>25</sup> Max-Harry, 'M. Maurice Ravel écrit à son tour un "Don Quichotte".'    <sup>26</sup> OL, letter 122.

<sup>27</sup> See Orenstein, 'Some unpublished music and letters', 317–22.

<sup>28</sup> Orenstein, *Ravel, Man and Musician*, 210; Roland-Manuel, *Maurice Ravel et son œuvre dramatique*, 149.